

"The man they call D doesn't need any help, I suppose?" she said, her expression composed and no sign of tears anywhere.

After watching the figure in crimson walk off a short distance to where her cyborg horse waited, D turned toward the grave. A faint groan had reached his ears.

"Oh, it seems that rascal the viscount knows what we've got in store for him! He's moaning about how he doesn't want to die. Shouting at us to stay back."

As the figure in black walked forward, the voice from the vicinity of his left hip continued. "But what I don't get is that girl. She's got the skill of a Hunter for sure, but what's with her acting so cool and collected? That was her own brother she cut down! And she didn't shed a single tear over him. Still, she doesn't look cold blooded. The way she acted toward you, it was like she was just a plain ol' farm girl dressed up for a costume party. Don't see a lot of that type these days."

"She gained something," D fairly muttered. "She must've, for an ordinary girl to become a Hunter. But in exchange—"

"She must've lost something, too, right?" the hoarse voice said, finishing the Hunter's thought. "What that something was—does that interest you?"

D didn't answer. If a million people knew him, every last one of them probably would reply that he had no interest at all in that topic. And they'd assert in unison that he'd never say so.

Passing through the entrance to the burial place, D vanished. Groans became sobs of fear, then the breathless huffing of the terrorized. And then—the screams of someone in their death throes.

Five days later, D was in Silver Strings Town. He was there to turn over a sample of the Noble's DNA to the local sheriff and to collect the reward.

"Nice little payday for you, isn't it?" the sheriff said venomously as D stuffed a thick wad of bills into his coat.





"We can trade places if you'd like."

The sheriff shuddered, saying, "Don't even joke about that. I'm happy just being the law in a hick town. They don't pay me enough to take on the Nobility. It's just—" He seemed to grow reflective, rubbing one arm before he continued. "I never thought I'd meet someone so good looking it made my hair stand on end. We've got hot springs here in town. What say you go have yourself a soak?"

"That's real neighborly of you."

The Hunter's voice had changed so radically the sheriff could only stand rooted and amazed as the young man in black walked toward the door.

"Between you and the woman who came in yesterday, I'd say Hunters these days are a pretty odd bunch."

"A woman?" the hoarse voice inquired.

"Yep. Only she wasn't cashing in on no Noble. It was a pair of thugs who'd jumped her. After putting 'em down, she finds out they're outlaws with prices on their heads, you see. But that woman—actually, *girl's* more like it—she really doesn't look like the kind to be working as a Hunter. Sure is pretty, but she just seems like the kind of average folk you'd run into anywhere, and—"

"What's her name?" the Hunter asked as he stood in the doorway, his back still to the lawman.

Knitting his brow a bit, the sheriff shortly replied, "I'm pretty sure it was Iriya. Say, are you a ventriloquist or something?"

Giving no reply, the Hunter stepped outside, where the hoarse voice from the vicinity of his left hip said, "Strange connection we've got here. Imagine meeting her here, of all places."

"Does that interest you?" D asked in his own voice.

The hoarse voice cleared its throat, replying in a not-on-your-life tone, "Well, putting that aside for the time being, the sheriff did say something about a hot spring, didn't he? Seems the waters have all kinds of stuff that does a body good. So long as it's not running water, you should probably suck it up and give it a try. What do you say we go for a dip?"

D's cyborg horse was tethered to a fence on the opposite side of the street. As he was crossing it, a trio of men coming from his left brushed past him.

"Hey!" the leftmost man shouted menacingly. "The corner of your coat hit me! Ain't you got nothing to say about that?"

"Sorry, pal," said a hoarse voice that didn't sound like it belonged to the Hunter at all, but there was no mistaking the utter contempt in its tone.

"Are you screwing with us, you [REDACTED]?" the same man shouted, and all three of them surrounded D.

"Hey, mister—you don't mind *this*, do you?" another said as he reached for D's chest.

A heartbeat later the man's wrist broke noisily, and as he was flipped over, his elbow shattered. Since he hit the ground headfirst, he suffered a horrendous concussion as well as having a cervical vertebra dislocated.

The expressions of the other two changed, and as they shouted curses and reached for the swords on their hips, the hoarse voice said simply, "You're gonna die," and froze them on the spot.

The hot spring in question, which lay on the east end of town, was shrouded in steam. Thanks to the patrons of the hot springs who came from other regions on hearing its praises, as well as to the money those people spent there, Silver Strings Town enjoyed a high standard of living that was rare in the Frontier sectors. Many paid for admission to the baths with goods such as colossal vegetables or synthesized beef, to the point where those running the establishments had to hire wagons six times a year to haul the bounty off to the food distribution center.

The springs were divided into a total of thirty-six different therapeutic baths, large and small: the public baths, the more curative medicinal baths, and the healing baths, where you could see the effects firsthand. The medicinal baths were three times as expensive



as the public ones, while the healing baths cost ten times as much.

Some establishments had a common entrance for all three kinds of bath, while others kept separate entrances, and in early afternoon, while the sun was still high, the girl rode her cyborg horse to the healing baths. The carriages, cars, and wheelchairs of the seriously injured or the infirm usually were lined up at the exclusive entrance regardless of the cost, but today carriages were few and far between, so the girl didn't have to wait before paying twice the healing baths' normal fee to the staff who eyed her crimson garb with wonder, and then requesting a private bathing area.

The path of stones and concrete was covered with droplets of condensation. Light spilling in through windows nearly thirty feet up cast dappled patterns on the floor. The girl's feet marched right through them.

Iron doors came into view, set into the wall to either side of her. Occurring at intervals of about thirty feet, they stretched on seemingly forever. The receptionist had given the girl number 49.

It took her seven minutes to reach the door with that number plate. Turning a brass knob, she heard the sound of the lock disengaging. A changing room that looked to be ten paces square appeared before her. The private hot spring the girl had requested was actually one intended for multiple occupants. She probably wanted ample space to relax alone.

Placing the last of her clothes into a cubbyhole in the wall, the girl slid open a glass door and entered the bathing area.

The vast bathing area was easily twice as large as the changing room, a rustic-looking place where natural black stone had been dissolved and mixed with concrete before being sprayed on the walls and floors, while steam and pools of milky-white therapeutic waters filled the room.

The girl was stark naked, carrying not so much as a hand towel. Without even a dagger for defense, her unguarded and glorious nakedness made her look like an ordinary hot spring patron instead of suggesting any connection to her line of work.

The bath was divided into a number of pools, each with a sign posted on the wall:

*Internal ailments: 3–5 dips of 5 minutes each. Drink no more than 1 teaspoon.*

*External injuries and skin conditions: 5 minutes or less.*

*External injuries and muscular problems: 10 minutes or less.*

*External injuries and internal-organ problems: 5 minutes or less.*

*External injuries and skeletal problems: 2 minutes or less.*

The girl selected “muscular problems” and immersed herself in the warm water. According to the sign’s brief description, the waters treated not only muscle aches, but also cuts and scrapes. The posted limit of ten minutes was how long it should take for a complete recovery, and at the same time the sign stated that it would be dangerous to stay in the bath beyond that point.

With her eyes closed, her face took on an expression just as peaceful as that of any other hot spring patron.

Before two minutes had passed, the glass door slid open and dark figures charged in, plowing through the white steam with an air of murderous intent. Four men gazed down at the pool.

The girl opened her eyes, took a look at their vicious scowls, and quickly closed them again. Her expression had become one of terrible boredom.

“And what might I be able to do for you?”

Her greeting was so reasonable—and in this case, entirely unexpected—that the men fell silent for a moment and exchanged glances before their lips twisted into grins.

A rough-looking giant of a man who had to be their leader said, “Sorry to barge in on you during your bath, though it’s doing wonders for our eyes!” Licking his lips, he continued, “And for our wallets, too. We’d love to drag you outta there and really stick it to you, but we were hired to take you down right where you are. You can soak there in your own blood!”